

Executive Summary

DCF Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care

When the Department of Children and Families (DCF) removes abused and/or neglected children from their homes, DCF assumes the responsibilities associated with parenting them during that time. This may include preparing them, in developmentally-appropriate ways, for eventual independence and adulthood. While DCF works to reunite these children and youth with their birth families, or establish new families through adoption, this is not always possible. These children and youth may remain in state care for an extended period of time - sometimes until they reach 18, the age of majority. It is DCF's duty, serving as a parent, to decide how to best prepare these youth to be on their own.

The transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency can be challenging for any young person. In today's society, many young people do not become self-sufficient until well after their 18th birthdays. Many are dependent on their families for longer periods, often remaining or returning to live at home well into their 20s and receiving both emotional and financial support as they continue with education or work in low paying entry-level jobs. Often, youth who exit state care do not have the same safety nets and support networks as others their age, and the transition to adulthood can be an even greater challenge. While some former DCF youth are resilient and thrive after leaving state care, others continue to struggle to overcome the challenges of being on their own.

Child welfare literature indicates youth in state care are at high risk for poor outcomes due to multiple compounding factors including: exposure to severe trauma; frequent school transfers and unmet special education needs; extended time in non-family placements such as congregate care settings; and limited opportunities to learn basic life skills. Research shows that youth who age out of the child welfare system are more likely to experience a myriad of problems such as a lack of high school education, behavioral health issues, unemployment, homelessness, criminal involvement, and pregnancy and parenthood at an early age.¹

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee voted to conduct a study in June 2013 to assess DCF services to prepare youth aging out of state care, with a focus on services to transition and discharge these youth. The study was also to review coordination efforts between DCF and other state agencies that assist DCF youth who age out of care. Continuing the recent PRI practice of conducting at least one study annually using the principles of Results-Based Accountability (RBA), this study was designated as that project for 2013.²

¹ Courtney, M.E., & Dworsky, A. (2005). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

² RBA "means the method of planning, budgeting and performance measurement for state programs that focuses on the quality of life results the state desires for its citizens and that identifies program performance measures and indicators of the progress the state makes in achieving such quality of life results in addition to the programs and partners that make a significant contribution to such quality of life results." (P.A. 09-166)

A compelling reason to pick this topic for the RBA assessment was the existence of the CT Kids Report Card.³ The report card, while still a project in process, is one of the most developed applications of the RBA approach in Connecticut at the state government level. The foundational concept of RBA is to first identify a quality of life result the state desires, and then measure all related activities and programs conducted by state government for their actual contributions in achieving that desired result. The law requiring the CT Kids Report Card includes a statewide quality of life result for Connecticut's children:

All Connecticut children grow up in stable environments, safe, healthy, and ready to lead successful lives.

Achievement of the result is for all children, which includes the group of children in Connecticut who are the focus of this study—those who are under the commitment of DCF when they turn 18, the legal age of adulthood. Given the ongoing work of the CT Kids Report Card that is already in progress on the broader population level results, the PRI committee determined the study's RBA focus would be most useful on the program level. However, quality of life results statements targeted to DCF youth who are aging out were also developed to guide this study and augment the CT Kids Report Card statement.

In terms of an overall finding, a comprehensive assessment about how well DCF is preparing youth who age out of DCF care is not possible at this time, and is hindered significantly by a lack of quality aggregate information on program activities and measures, and individual youth outcomes. Implementation of recent initiatives will strengthen data-sharing and performance monitoring efforts.

There is no one single strategy that will improve the outcomes of youth in DCF care who are aging out. There are several interconnections across issues and needs for this population. These youth may cross several jurisdictions and service delivery systems such as child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and behavioral health. Therefore, DCF should not be considered alone in its responsibilities. Together, the agencies must undertake complementary strategies in education, employment, health care, and other areas. As such, many identified issues will require further review.

Many of the strategies described in this report have been mentioned by national researchers, advocacy groups, youth advisory boards, or are in some way already being considered or developed by DCF. This report highlights strategies and approaches aimed at improving outcomes for youth in care in a number of areas outlined below.

³ As of July 1, 2011, the Children Committee is required to “maintain an annual report card that evaluates the progress of state policies and programs in promoting the result that all Connecticut children grow up in stable environments, safe, healthy, and ready to lead successful lives”, in consultation with OFA, OLR, and the Commission on Children.” (P.A. 11-109, codified at C.G.S. Sec. 2-53m)

PRI RECOMMENDATIONS

PERMANENCY - Assist youth to establish stable and enduring relationships

DCF should help identify and support permanent adult/family connections for youth through various means including an enhanced search of a youth's natural network system, sibling visitations, mentorships, and policies to improve youth and social worker interactions. The department should continue to gather professionals and experts to review its policies and practices regarding permanency goals. DCF should also develop discharge policies and tools to ensure the planning process: 1) begins early to address any developmental or academic needs for youth, and 2) facilitates youth involvement.

Permanency Roundtables

- 1. DCF should consider implementing the recommendations and proposals assembled from the recent permanency roundtable experience. DCF should continue the permanency roundtable approach to help achieve a preferred permanency goal for youth designated as "another planned permanent living arrangement" (APPLA).**

Sibling Connections

- 2. DCF must continue to implement the provisions of P.A. 12-71 that ensures sibling visitation for children in the care and custody of the department and prepare the Sibling Bill of Rights as prescribed by law.**

Youth and Social Worker Relationships

- 3. DCF should consider the implementation of the statewide youth advisory board recommendations aimed at developing positive youth and worker relationships.**
- 4. DCF should develop informational sessions offering staff and caregivers a better understanding of adolescent behavior and practical case management tips.**

Transition/Discharge Plans

- 5. DCF should develop enhanced discharge tools and checklists to ensure planning occurs in an earlier, well-timed, and orderly manner to allow for periodic assessments to address any developmental delays in particular for educational and post-secondary readiness. A multidisciplinary approach should be used to address permanency, education, life skills, and medical/mental health issues.**
- 6. Every effort must be made to ensure the active participation of adolescents in the planning process. Meetings should be held, whenever possible, at a time and place that facilitates the youth's participation (e.g., after school hours or held at a facility if a youth resides in congregate care.)**

- 7. DCF should consult with social workers and youth advisory members to develop youth-friendly or youth-designed tools to help engage youth in their case planning and understand the topics that may be discussed and how to provide feedback about their plans.**
- 8. DCF should explore the feasibility of hiring or appointing a transition planning specialist in each region. The department should re-examine its transition/discharge planning documents and develop additional tools to ensure all relevant domains are fully addressed.**
- 9. DCF must ensure that no youth is discharged from the system without identified permanent relationships with supportive adults. DCF must increase its efforts to assist committed youth to identify significant others.**

DCF should engage in activities that foster and support the development of enduring connections. DCF should develop policy and staff training to help youth to re-establish and support, when appropriate, relationships with relatives and other significant others prior to discharge.

HOUSING – *Improve access to housing options.*

DCF should examine its existing placement options to ensure current and future residential needs are being met in the least restrictive setting. The department must ensure social workers and regional offices are aware of local housing assistance services available to young adults. DCF and local housing authorities and community-based organizations should continue to leverage resources to assist youth locate affordable, safe, and stable housing.

Needs Assessment

- 10. DCF should conduct a placement needs assessment for adolescents in out-of-home care. The assessment should include a periodic trend analysis of DCF's aging youth demographics to assist in planning an inventory of placement options and alternatives to ensure older youth are placed in the least restrictive and most appropriate settings. Specifically, the assessment should examine whether options for supportive housing programs should be expanded to ensure that youth, particularly those in congregate care settings, can gradually transition from more restrictive settings to fully independent living.**
- 11. DCF should review all of its existing supportive housing and independent living program policies and related stipend allotments for any necessary updates.**
- 12. DCF should continue its work to reduce reliance on congregate care and transition youth into less restrictive settings through efforts such as targeted recruiting of foster care homes for adolescent and older youth.**

Housing Assistance After DCF Discharge

- 13. DCF policy should clearly dictate social workers' responsibilities to help youth locate affordable housing and, when appropriate, supportive housing options prior to passing from care.**

At a minimum, DCF workers should educate and familiarize youth with public and private entities that can provide housing assistance. DCF should ensure that each regional office knows what housing options and resources exist for youth over 18 in their communities.

- 14. If program outcomes continue to prove successful, DCF should seek to expand capacity of The Connection pilot program for older youth at risk for homelessness.**
- 15. DCF must ensure that youth understand the basic rights and responsibilities of a landlord and tenant, basic sections of a lease, legitimate reasons for being evicted and how to terminate a lease agreement, and the appropriate entity to turn to when housing assistance is needed. This should be incorporated into the Life Skills course instruction.**

EDUCATION – *Promote educational attainment.*

Low educational attainment rates may limit a youth's employment opportunities, earning potential, and ability to maintain financial stability. DCF, in conjunction with the State Department of Education (SDE), should develop policies and programs to promote educational goal setting, minimize disruptions in education, and inform youth about educational opportunities that will improve their college and career outcomes.

Improving High School Educational Attainment

- 16. DCF should track and monitor provisions relating to school transfers and remaining in the same school of origin pursuant to C.G.S. Section 17a-16a.**
- 17. Upon completion of the two-year Raise the Grade Pilot, the program should be evaluated and modified as needed to be extended to the entire state.**
- 18. DCF should evaluate the ratio of educational consultants and specialists to determine whether the number should be adjusted to adequately review every youth's educational needs and consultation requests.**
- 19. DCF should consult with the State Department of Education on the feasibility of appointing educational surrogates to all DCF committed youth.**
- 20. To assist incorporating education goals into case plans, DCF's educational consultants should develop a checklist to ensure educational needs and potential Post-Secondary Education (PSE) requirements are met. The checklist should be**

specific to the youth's age/year in school and be reviewed every six months during administrative case reviews.

21. Schools districts should be required to report in their strategic school profiles the number of DCF committed youth they are serving with and without special needs, the academic progress of these youth, and the percentage who have success plans and individual transition plans.

Improving Post-Secondary Education (PSE) Attainment

22. DCF should encourage and resume offering PSE preparatory activities. College visitation trips should be held periodically to help DCF youth visualize the prospect of higher education as a possibility.
23. DCF should continue to provide additional supports for PSE students and examine whether other on-campus support and mentorships for post-secondary success should be developed and offered to youth. DCF should also improve its efforts to make resource information available to PSE youth.

EMPLOYMENT - *Connect youth with employment and career training.*

DCF should continue to build partnerships with the workforce investment boards (WIBs) and private employers to create training and employment opportunities. The agency should also encourage further work readiness activities such as job shadowing or volunteer experience.

Work Readiness Activities

24. DCF should offer career assessments to assist youth explore various career paths and support other career preparation activities such as online research, attendance at career fairs, speaking to a career counselor, or arranging a visit to a work site or job shadowing.
25. DCF should assist foster care parents and other care-givers to help youth understand and practice important skills for obtaining a job such as developing a resume, finding job listings, completing applications, and interviewing (for example, hold mock interviews).
26. DCF should encourage youth participation in volunteer or vocational experience every year starting at an early age.
27. Job training program providers should continue efforts to recruit and re-engage youth participation through mentorships and outreach efforts.

HEALTH CARE – *Assist youth access and manage health care.*

DCF should develop policies and mechanisms to improve youth access to medical and behavioral health care services and maintain Medicaid coverage. DCF should continue its collaboration with the Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and Developmental Services (DDS) to ensure smooth transition of DCF youth to appropriate systems of care by improving data-sharing and better instruction of life skills.

Access to Health Care and Medicaid

- 28. DCF should examine the current DCF health advocate workload to determine the need to have, at a minimum, one health advocate in each regional office.**
- 29. DCF should consider implementing the recommendations proposed by Connecticut Voices for Children to ensure continued Medicaid coverage.**

Transitions to Other Systems of Care

- 30. An appropriate case plan must be in place prior to transition of a DCF youth into another system of care.**
- 31. Collaboration between DCF and DMHAS should continue on the Learning Inventory of Skills Training (LIST) program.**
- 32. The DCF placement needs assessment should include a determination of sufficiency of emergency and respite beds for youth with behavioral health issues over the age of 18 in DCF care.**
- 33. The memorandum of agreement (MOA) between DCF and DDS should be modified to include provisions regarding maintaining a centralized process for referral receipt, eligibility determination, and transition planning.**
- 34. Improvements should be made to ensure better data-sharing occurs in a timely fashion for youth transitions to DMHAS and DDS.**
- 35. DCF, together with DDS, should examine whether disincentives exist for adopting or seeking legal guardianship of youth requiring DDS services. If so, the agencies should prepare potential statutory or administrative remedies to address such disincentives.**

LIFE SKILLS, RE-ENTRY, & TARGETED SERVICES – *Prepare youth for independent living*

DCF should offer life skills instruction at various age intervals with course options appropriate to the youth skills and needs with more hands-on experience. The department should also connect former DCF youth to formal aftercare services that may direct them to more

appropriate assistance and referrals to adult services. DCF should continue collaboration with various community providers to address concerns of specific target populations such as pregnant or parenting teens, gay youth, runaways, or victims of sex trafficking.

Life Skills Instruction

36. Life skills instruction should be:

- offered at various age intervals such as ages 14, 16, 18, and six months prior to discharge;
- tailored to topics most appropriate to the age group to which it is offered;
- expanded to include additional instruction on health care and intangible (soft) skills such as how to communicate with landlords or apply for benefit programs;
- modified for youth populations with particular needs (e.g., behavioral health, pregnant and/or parenting);
- providing more hands-on opportunities for youth practice of life skills; and
- made available, when possible, online or through mobile devices.

37. A monitoring and tracking system should be established to identify DCF youth eligible for life skills instruction beginning at age 14 and to ensure all eligible youth receive an initial assessment of basic life skills and periodic reassessment. Case plans should include the initial life skills assessment and continuing assessments until the youth's discharge.

38. DCF should consider having the contracted life skills providers conduct a student satisfaction survey at the end of each life skill course.

Re-Entry Services

39. DCF should consider developing formal aftercare services for young people aged 18 to 21 by instituting a resource network of agency and providers who may assist youth with locating a range of needs.

40. DCF should consider the New York approach of using a trial discharge period from care of six months duration during which the youth's case remains open eliminating the need for re-entry.

Pregnant and/or Parenting Youth

41. DCF should collect and evaluate data on pregnant and/or parenting youth in state care. Among the data components that should be considered are: annual trends, demographics, custodial status, living arrangements, educational attainment, employment status, health histories, government benefits status, and the length of time in care or return to care.

- 42. DCF should assess the existing practices and policies to prevent pregnancy and support pregnant and/or parenting youth in care. The assessment should identify the strengths and weaknesses of current services along with potential remedies.**
- 43. Adolescent case planning should take into consideration the specialized case planning and supports needs for unique adolescent population such as pregnant or parenting youth.**
- 44. DCF should consider developing mentorship service for pregnant/parenting youth to provide support and guidance.**

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT – *Offer leadership and community engagement opportunities*

DCF should explore ways of increasing mentorships, encourage diverse participation in youth advisory boards, continue to support Wilderness School activities, and develop a website specifically for older DCF youth.

Mentoring Programs

- 45. DCF should consider the Missouri approach of developing mentorship programs for different aspects (e.g., employment, parenting, education). It should also consider using youth advisory boards to develop a youth-to-youth mentoring program.**
- 46. DCF should educate prospective foster families, mentors, and kin resources about how they can be a life-long support to a youth even if the youth does not come to live with them full-time.**

Youth Advisory Boards

- 47. Regular youth advisory board meetings with the DCF commissioner should be incorporated into agency policy to ensure continuity in each administration.**
- 48. Each DCF area office should have an individual appointed whose responsibility is youth advisory board recruitment and management. Additional efforts should be made to offer a cross-section of youth from all types of DCF placements (e.g., congregate, juvenile justice, maternity) an opportunity to participate in youth advisory boards and provide their perspective.**

Wilderness School

- 49. Participation in Wilderness School activities by youth and agency staff should continue to be supported and encouraged. Wilderness School staffing levels should be examined to ensure participation requests are met and to preserve continued program stability with permanent employee positions.**

Youth Website

- 50. DCF should act on the 2012 proposal of the DCF Family Foster Care Committee and develop a website for DCF adolescent and transitioning youth that helps youth know and understand the resources available to them during and after DCF care.**

DATA COLLECTION – *Improve data development*

DCF should continue to implement recent federal and state initiatives on collecting and sharing data about outcomes of youth in agency care and use it to evaluate the services and supports that are being provided. DCF should also complete its mandated cost analysis of implementing the federal Fostering Connections provisions.

- 51. DCF must remedy its federal National Youth in Transition Database compliance issues to ensure penalties are not imposed and allow for better performance measures of its transitional services for older youth.**
- 52. The statutorily mandated cost analysis report on the federal Fostering Connections should be completed and results released to legislative committees as required by P.A. 13-234.**